

The University of Chicago

SOVIET DISARMAMENT PROPOSALS
1917-1935

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE DIVISION OF THE
SOCIAL SCIENCES IN CANDIDACY FOR THE
DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY
1942

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CHICAGO, ILLINOIS
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One of the results of the war-weariness growing out of the first World War was the increasing attention devoted to the problem of disarmament. It was hoped that a decrease in armaments would diminish the tensions that lead to war--a condition which, in turn, would promote the willingness of nations to continue the process. There was also the fact that a war-torn world could not contemplate with equanimity the prospect of constantly increasing expenditures on armaments at a time when there was such crying need for economic recovery. Each nation had found that the value of costly increases in its own armed strength had often been offset by increases its rivals had felt obliged to make in reply. Disarmament, however, held out the possibility that a nation might reduce its absolute armed strength and still not alter its relative strength, if only others could be induced to make corresponding reductions. Thus a nation could make a contribution to world peace, retain its relative strength, unaltered, and divert to more productive purposes the funds that would otherwise have been expended on armaments.

The difficulty lay in the fact that no nation was satisfied to leave its relative strength unaltered; it wished to increase it. Every disarmament conference therefore became, in effect, an armament conference, in which each nation strove to induce others to reduce their armed strength in a greater proportion than its own. Disarmament discussions based on such mutually exclusive premises were foredoomed to failure. Such failure, in turn, increased international tensions to the point where nations, already to some extent recovering from the stunning effects of the World War, felt obliged and able to abandon rivalry by reduction for the old method of rivalry by increase of armaments.

The policy followed by the Soviet Government in regard to disarmament was likewise based on the desire, not only to retain but to increase to the utmost its relative strength. The principal difference between the disarmament policy of the Soviet Government and those of other governments was that negotiations

undertaken by others sought relative superiority of nation above nation, while those of the Soviet Government sought the superiority of class above class.

The Soviet Government, on coming into power, considered itself as but the first section of the world proletariat to overthrow a considerable section of the capitalist class. It believed that the rest of the world proletariat, profiting by its example, would overthrow that rest of the capitalist class. It condemned all foreign governments as bourgeois, and concentrated its energies upon their overthrow. In this task, the rest of the proletariat, which it considered its only friend and ally, would be greatly assisted if the bourgeois governments could be induced to disarm. Lenin's slogan called for the armament of the proletariat and the disarmament of the bourgeoisie. As years passed, it became evident that the slogan was being fulfilled in reverse, with the armament of the capitalist governments and their increasing ability to disarm the proletariat. The Soviet Government found itself in constant struggle for existence, first against the Germans, then against the Allies, and always against counter-revolutionary elements within its own boundaries.

As its faith in the strength of the proletariat weakened, and its fear of the strength of the capitalist governments grew, it could no longer hold to its original position that all capitalist governments must be fought at once. It began to distinguish between the smaller capitalist governments, that were only bourgeois, and the more powerful ones, that were not only capitalistic, but also imperialistic. Assuming that the former were not dangerous to the Soviet Government so much in themselves, but primarily as tools in the hands of the more remote, but more powerful imperialistic powers, it altered its stand in regard to disarmament. Still believing that the complete disarmament and destruction of all capitalist governments was essential for the ultimate realization of the ideal of world peace, it found it necessary, while awaiting such a result, to conclude treaties of peace with its immediate neighbors. The peace treaties concluded by the Soviet Government in 1920 and 1921 with Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland indicate three basic principles of Soviet disarmament policy:

1. Immediate cessation of all military hostilities, and

the mutual recall of troops.

2. Disbandment of irregular armed bands, that is, of groups secretly organized or encouraged, but not officially recognized, by the various governments for the purpose of attacking others.

3. The establishment of neutral zones along the common frontiers, within which armed forces of the respective parties, and their equipment, were to be admitted only in specified numbers.

Exhausted by its series of wars against Germany, the Allies, the Russian Whites, and the states that sprung up on the outer fringes of the territory of the former Imperial Russian Government, and undergoing the devastating results of blockade and famine, it welcomed peace and whatever measures of disarmament it had been able to achieve. Finding it necessary, for economic reasons to disarm still further, it called a disarmament conference at Moscow in December, 1922, at which delegations were present from Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and the Soviet Government. At this conference, it proposed, in addition to the proposals contained in the peace treaties with the attending countries, that:

1. Each of the countries represented at the conference reduce its armed forces to one-fourth of the current number.

2. Each country limit its military expenditures to 400 gold rubles for each man retained.

Poland supported by Estonia, Latvia, and Finland, countered by proposing a draft treaty of non-aggression and arbitration, to be signed by all as a prerequisite to further disarmament discussions. The Soviet Government declared its willingness to sign such a treaty, but only on condition of the simultaneous adoption of its disarmament proposals. Both sides proving intransigent, the conference ended in failure. The causes for its failure may be summarized as follows:

1. The Soviet Government was not prepared to give an adequate quid pro quo. The Soviet offer to reduce its own armaments was no inducement to the others to do likewise, for they knew that Russia's plight would force it to reduce even if they did not, as, in fact it did soon after the failure of the conference. Had they, on the other hand, agreed to reduce

their forces in accordance with the Soviet proposal, they would not only have lost an opportunity to gain in strength relative to the Soviet Government; they would have suffered a loss in such strength, because of various technical factors favoring the stronger power in cases of proportional reduction.

2. Mutual distrust. Communist agitation and propaganda, deriving its inspiration from organizations flourishing on Soviet territory, made the neighbors of the Soviet Government doubt the sincerity of the latter's disarmament proposals. This doubt was re-enforced by Soviet attempts to turn the conference itself into a means of propaganda. On the other hand, the insistence, by Poland, Estonia, Latvia, and Finland, that the discussion of disarmament be postponed, even if the Soviet Government signed the proposed treaty, led that government to doubt their intention to disarm at all.

Despite its failure, however, the conference was valuable as an indication that the Soviet Government was willing to treat with capitalist governments and even to sign a treaty of non-aggression if it could only obtain consent to certain measures of disarmament.

In regard to naval armaments, in which it was especially weak, the Soviet Government receded still further from its original position that it would agree only to complete disarmament, which in turn had been considered possible only as a result of the overthrow of all capitalist governments. It even went so far as to participate in two conferences for naval disarmament called by the League of Nations, which it abhorred, as an instrument for the destruction of the Soviet Government and the domination of the world by the imperialistic powers. At the conference of Lausanne in December, 1922, and the conference at Rome in February, 1924, both sponsored by the League of Nations, the Soviet Government completely reversed the stand it had taken at Moscow in regard to treaties of security. Instead of insisting that such treaties be preceded, or at least accompanied by obligation to disarm, it proposed, at Lausanne and Rome, to institute measures of naval disarmament only after such time as the other delegations might feel inclined to offer certain guarantees of security demanded by the Soviet Government. More specifically, the Soviet proposal at Lausanne was an offer to reduce its Black Sea fleet

on condition of the closing of the Straits at Constantinople. At Rome, the Soviet Government's offer to reduce its naval tonnage from 340,000 to 280,000 was made conditional upon the prior agreement by others to forbid the war vessels of non-riparian powers access either to the Black or the Baltic Seas. In case of the rejection of the desired agreement the Soviet Government proposed not only to withdraw its offer to reduce--it actually proposed to increase its tonnage to 490,000! From rejecting or acquiescing in security agreements as obscuring the pre-eminent need for disarmament, the Soviet Government had come to the point of demanding them under threat of the reverse of disarmament.

The Soviet proposal for naval disarmament at Lausanne and Rome, like those for land disarmament at Moscow, were rejected. They are interesting to the historian, however, as another indication of the fact that disarmament conferences are nothing more than disguised armament conferences, where each participant offers to reduce no more than the absolute strength at its disposal, and that only on condition of an increase in its relative strength. At Moscow, the Soviet Government had limited its disarmament proposals to the phase of land forces, in which it enjoyed a superior position in relation to the other participants and even then, its proposals had been of such a nature as to increase that relative superiority. At the same conference, however, it expressed its unwillingness to discuss naval reductions, on the grounds that the great naval powers were not represented. Given an opportunity to participate, at Lausanne and Rome, in conferences where great naval powers were represented, the Soviet Government finding itself in an inferior position, sought to increase its relative naval strength, either by reducing the attacking power of potentially hostile fleets or by adding to its own naval tonnage.

It would not be necessary to stress the obvious self-interest dominating Soviet Government policy if not for the deliberate assumption of a holier-than-thou attitude by the Soviet Government in connection with that policy. The culmination of this attitude was reached in the Soviet proposal for total disarmament made at Geneva before the Preparatory Commission for the Disarmament Conference in February, 1928, and repeated there before the Conference for the Reduction and Limitation of Armaments in February, 1932. In proposing total disarmament, the Soviet

Government not only took pains to give the impression that its sole purpose in so doing was to promote the cause of peace and disarmament, it repeatedly accused the other delegations of hypocrisy and sabotage in regard to that cause. Litvinov himself, who, as head of the Soviet delegation, had announced the Soviet proposal for total disarmament to the world, admitted that he had known beforehand that it would not be accepted, but that he had wished to expose the hypocrisy of the capitalist governments before the masses of the world's population. In short, it was a temporary reversion to the original Soviet policy of urging the disarmament of the bourgeoisie in the hope of encouraging the armament of the proletariat. The other delegations at Geneva, in turn, considered the proposal as an indication of Soviet insincerity, as an attempt to wreck the conference for selfish purposes of propaganda. The Soviet proposal for total disarmament was thus foredoomed to rejection, regardless of any possible intrinsic merits, because of the open antagonism existing between author and audience. The official summary of the proposal itself reads as follows:

The delegation of the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics is authorized by its Government to propose the complete abolition of all land, naval, and air forces.

The Government of the Union suggests the following measures for the realization of the proposal:

(a) The dissolution of all land, sea, and air forces and the non-admittance of the existence of any concealed form whatever.

(b) The destruction of all weapons, military supplies means of chemical warfare, and all other forms and means of destruction in the possession of troops or in military and general stores.

(c) The scrapping of all war ships and military air vessels.

(d) The discontinuance of calling up citizens for military training either in armies or in public bodies.

(e) Legislation for the abolition of military service, either compulsory, voluntary, or recruited.

(f) Legislation prohibiting the calling up of trained reserves.

(g) The destruction of fortresses and naval and air bases.

(h) The scrapping of military plants and factories and of all war industry equipment in general industrial works.

(i) The discontinuance of assigning funds for military purposes both on state budgets and those of public bodies.

[No article (j) appears in the minutes.]

(k) The abolition of military, naval, and air ministries, and the dissolution of general staffs and military administrations, departments, and institutions of every kind.

(l) The legislative prohibition of military propaganda and military training of the population and of military education, both in state and public bodies.

(m) The legislative prohibition of the patenting of all kinds of armaments and means of destruction with a view to the removal of incentives to the invention of the same.

(n) Legislation making the infringement of any of the above stipulations a grave crime against the state.

(o) The withdrawal or corresponding alteration of all legislative acts, both of national or international scope, infringing the above stipulations.

The objections raised to the Soviet proposal may be summarized in the following manner:

1. It was too drastic. The world was not yet ready for such thorough going measures.

2. It would not work. Unless the causes of international tension were first removed, nations would seek to evade the provisions of the proposal. They would re-arm in secret, or they would use for international conflicts forces they would be permitted to retain for internal police purposes.

3. It ignored Article VIII of the Covenant of the League of Nations, which made disarmament subject to the geographical situation and circumstances of each State, and required any reduction of armaments to be "consistent with the national safety and enforcement by common action of international obligations." Only a system of collective security, under a strengthened world organization, and taking into consideration the special circumstances of each state, would induce the nations of the world to forego the protection afforded by armaments.

4. Colonial and subject peoples would rise against their rulers if the latter were deprived of armaments.

The Soviet replies to the above objections were substantially as follows:

1. It was not the people of the world, but only their governments that were not prepared for such thorough going measures. The people of the world would welcome any measure that would lighten the economic burden imposed upon them by armaments in time of peace and the toll in human misery exacted from them by armaments in time of war.

2. To avert the possibility of evasion and secret rearmament, the Soviet proposal contained provisions for international supervision, based not on war-minded government offi-

cials, but on peace-minded workers' representatives. The forces permitted for police purposes were so small that no nation would risk internal disturbances for the sake of international conflicts.

3. If true disarmament was incompatible with the Covenant of the League of Nations, then so much the worse for the Covenant. The nations who had created it could also repeal it. If each nation were permitted to plead special circumstances, no slightest degree of disarmament would ever be achieved.

4. If the only thing that bound colonial and subject peoples to their rulers was armed force, that tie were better dissolved.

Upon the rejection of its proposal for total disarmament, the Soviet Delegation made a proposal, on March 23, 1928, and many isolated ones later, calling for partial disarmament. The outstanding features of these proposals were:

1. Reduction was on an objective mathematical basis, starting from the status quo.

2. It bore most heavily on the most heavily armed states, least heavily on the least heavily armed states, and not at all on those disarmed as a result of the World War.

3. Types of armament that were primarily offensive or directed against the civilian population were abolished, leaving only those defensive in nature.

4. New weapons or patterns were forbidden.

5. Reserves were limited and conversion of commercial equipment to military purposes forbidden.

6. Not only personnel and material, but also military budgets were limited.

Here, finally, we see the Soviet government making concrete, generally applicable proposals, not of a nature intended primarily to increase its own relative strength, but even to decrease it, if necessary, for the cause of general peace and disarmament. Before the final breakdown of world disarmament discussions it had progressed to the point where a number of formerly hostile delegations were beginning to recognize both the sincerity of its purpose and the intrinsic value of many of its proposals.

Another indication of the growing recognition accorded to Soviet efforts for peace and disarmament may be seen in the

increasing number of states with which it succeeded in concluding treaties of non-aggression.

At the Moscow Conference it had refused to sign the proposed treaty of arbitration and non-aggression. When the League of Nations submitted its Draft Treaty of Mutual Assistance, and its Geneva Protocol for the Pacific Settlement of International Disputes, the Soviet Government had rejected them, as instruments for the domination of the weaker nations by the stronger. Nevertheless, by 1925, the Soviet Government began to organize a security system of its own, based, not on collective action against the aggressor, but only on mutual agreement to abstain from aggression. It concluded such treaties with Turkey, Germany, Afghanistan, Lithuania, and Persia in the years 1925-1927, and, in the years 1932-1933, with Finland, Latvia, Estonia, Poland, France, Rumania, and Italy. In general, these agreements were characterized by the features of neutrality, non-aggression, non-participation in hostile agreements with third powers (including agreements of boycott and blockade) and the use of pacific procedure in the settlement of international disputes. It also signed the Pact of Paris renouncing the use of war as an instrument of international policy, although it objected to the loose wording and the vague reservations which, in Soviet opinion, virtually nullified the effect of the Pact.

Another feature of Soviet non-aggression policy was the extension of the concept of non-aggression to include the obligation to abstain from all forms of economic as well as political and military aggression. In 1933, all the various features of this policy were brought together in a Soviet Draft Pact Defining the Aggressor. This Pact sought to ensure to each nation, not only complete territorial inviolability, but "the right of the free development according to its own choice and at its own rate." It held that no considerations whatever, whether political, economic, social, religious, or cultural, could justify acts of aggression. Most of these points eventually gained widespread recognition by being incorporated into a Draft Act by the Committee on Security Questions of the Conference for the Reduction and the Limitation of Armaments on May 24, 1933. Finding the Soviet Government more co-operative in its attitude, the chairman of the committee, as well as many formerly hostile delegations, congrat-

ulated the Soviet Delegation on its contribution to the cause of peace. Seeing its definition of the aggressor so well received, the Soviet Government determined, as it had in the case of the Pact of Paris, not to wait for ultimate universal acceptance, but to put it into effect immediately as between the Soviet Union and its neighbors. By the end of 1933, Litvinov was able to report to the Central Executive Committee of the U.S.S.R. that his proposal was already contained in agreements with a "solid chain of our neighbors, from Finland to Afghanistan."

By the end of 1933, however, even the security afforded by such a chain of non-aggression treaties seemed insufficient, in view of the Japanese and German withdrawals from League of Nations deliberations. A friend of Germany since the Treaty of Rapallo in 1922, the Soviet Government found its relations with that country unrecognizable. Fearing the growing aggressiveness and might of its two most powerful neighbors, the Soviet Union found itself forced to make a fourth and final change in its disarmament policy. It could no longer afford to consider France and Great Britain as its most bitter opponents. It saw that it must begin to seek their good will against the day when they might be useful as allies against the greater menace of Germany and Japan. To this end, it gave up all opposition to the system of Versailles, the League of Nations, and treaties of mutual assistance. By 1934, it was a member of the League of Nations, which it had long reviled. Its admission to the League had been facilitated by France, who hoped that Russia's entry would hasten the realization of a European pact of mutual assistance. On March 16, 1935, the German Government restored conscription. Realizing, finally, that all hope of disarmament was in fact long dead, and that German rearmament must be answered by the greater armament of its potential victims, the Soviet Union dropped all talk of disarmament, ceased to wait for other countries to join a European pact of mutual assistance, and urged France to conclude a bilateral treaty of mutual assistance with the Soviet Union at once. The signature of the Franco-Soviet Treaty of Mutual Assistance on May 2, 1935, followed by the signature of the Soviet-Czechoslovakian Treaty of Mutual Assistance a fortnight later, brought the period of Soviet disarmament discussions to a close. Henceforth, in view of the mounting peril, there could be no

thought of anything but armaments.

Although all its efforts to prevent war eventually resulted in failure, it would not be reasonable to conclude that they were ill-advised. Not one nation, but the entire world must bear responsibility for the failure of post-war efforts to avert a renewal of world war. On the contrary, the Soviet Union may well look back with pride on its long record of sustained effort for world peace.

Although every nation seeks peace primarily for itself, the Soviet Union may congratulate itself on having been one of the first to recognize that, under modern conditions, peace is indivisible. Utopian as its proposals for total disarmament may have been, they could, if adopted, hardly have wrought greater havoc than the global war they were intended to prevent. Its proposals for the abolition of the most deadly weapons, even if they could not have prevented war, would at least have lessened its appalling destructiveness. Its definition of the aggressor, coupled with adequate collective security, which the Soviet Union eventually came to advocate, might have been of considerable value in crystallizing public opinion and organizing concerted action against aggressors, had they been accepted. Although there is no more safety in predicting the future than in speculating about the past, it is at least permissible to expect that many of the features included in the Soviet proposals at Geneva for partial disarmament will be used at the end of the present war by a new international organization in its efforts to create a lasting world peace.

